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The case for and against collaboration with China

Space has always been a venue for partnerships and competition, whether the “handshake-in-space” Apollo–Soyuz Test Project (ASTP) in 1975, or the US space race with the Soviets in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although the space age dawned in competitive mode, today’s political and funding realities have shifted the balance more towards cooperation, although, as we shall see, this trend may soon be reversed.

International cooperation is perhaps no better exemplified than by the case of the International Space Station (ISS), with its 16 partner nations. Another opportunity for international cooperation is the Vision for Space Exploration (VSE), although, since NASA has already sacrificed its image as a technology innovator to pursue exploration, it is understandable that it does not want to be further constrained by foreign policy requirements. However, exploration, especially on the scale envisioned by the VSE, demands leadership, which in turn is dependent on foreign policy considerations. While it would be a shame to waste such a rare opportunity for exploration and cooperation, in reality, the VSE must compete in a difficult budget environment. This demand for funds may cannibalize both the ISS and NASA’s science programs, making it difficult to realize some, if not all, the goals of the VSE. The environment for international and multilateral space cooperation is further complicated by the complex civil space situation. Whereas, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there were only two players in space, there are currently half a dozen nations (China, France, Great Britain, Russia, and the US) with full space capabilities, and many more, such as Israel, Ukraine, and Brazil, with partial capabilities. Undeniably, the US remains the dominant player, and NASA has a clear mandate to implement the goals of the VSE. However, whether the agency will be able to attract other nations to return to the Moon, in the same way as it persuaded countries to take part in the ISS program, is uncertain. A part of the reason is that the transatlantic ISS partnership has changed, mostly due to the trade limitations associated with the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) and the uncertainty surrounding the future of the Space Shuttle and its impact on the ISS. Plans to retire the Shuttle in 2010 will leave the US without a manned

spaceflight capability for at least five years and may signal an erosion of NASA's leadership in space. Exacerbating the situation is the realization that, from a budgetary perspective, it is impossible to fully fund a completed ISS, a new transportation system, *and* return to the Moon. One approach that the US may employ to remedy the situation is to negotiate a win-win exit strategy from the ISS with its partners. Such an agreement would include cooperation on transportation systems to reach the Moon – a strategy that would require strengthening waning alliances with ESA and Japan. Another option would be for the US to forge additional partnerships in space with India and China. Such an agreement would permit Indian astronauts and Chinese taikonauts to visit the ISS, or perhaps the Chinese could build a laboratory module that could be attached to a vacant docking port.¹ Chinese scientists and engineers could then develop components of the next generation of spaceships bound for the Moon and Mars. These, and other suggestions for how the two space powers might collaborate in space, are the subject of regular editorials in newspapers, on blogs, and websites. Consider all the time and money that could be saved if only China and the US could cooperate in low Earth orbit (LEO), the pundits suggest. Just think of all the mutual understanding and respect that would result from such a partnership, they say. Undoubtedly, space cooperation projects exist that could deliver worthwhile benefits to both the US and China at acceptable costs and risk. However, anyone who seriously believes that such collaboration could occur is in serious need of a reality check because, for better or for worse, any partnership between Washington and Beijing is unlikely to be realized any time soon.

CHINA'S COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS

China has signed cooperative space agreements with several countries, including Britain, Canada, France, Pakistan, Russia, and Brazil. For example, China has a cooperative agreement with the University of Surrey Space Centre in Great Britain, which markets microsatellites to perform scientific missions such as Earth surveillance. Needless to say, the Sino-Surrey alliance has not received the approval of the US, which is understandably concerned that microsatellite technology could be easily modified for ASAT purposes. Furthermore, the Sino-Surrey association has caused some concerns among politicians in Britain:

“There is no doubt about this: Surrey has put China into the space weapons business. I am very alarmed. I am particularly concerned because China seems to be right in the middle of nuclear proliferation, passing technology to North Korea, which helps other rogue states such as Iraq and Libya. This may seem like something far away from home. But it directly affects our own national security. This is all happening under the government that promised us ethical foreign policy. What we have got is no foreign policy.”

British Shadow Defense Secretary, Iain Duncan Smith (February, 2001)

Despite all its cooperative space agreements, the international cooperation most